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ABSTRACT

The relationship between business and the liberal arts is discussed by the Chairman of CBS, Inc. The following attributes are identified as valuable to a liberal arts education: an open, inquiring, and flexible mind; the possession of broadly applicable skills; the exercise of individual judgment; adaptability to change; affection for the arts; and ability to write and speak clearly and to read. Successful executives will be those who understand and interpret complex relationships. To be effective demands continual reconsiderations of assumptions underlying old and familiar networks, as well as the gathering and sorting of new information. Managers need to be flexible, critical, and capable of continuous learning, as well as capable of anticipating change. To examine the influence of the liberal arts educational background on effective business leadership, CBS has funded the establishment of a Corporate Council on the Liberal Arts at the American Academy of Art and Sciences. Information is being collected on the role of liberal arts graduates employed at CBS. In addition, the performance of liberal arts and non-liberal arts graduates will be compared over a 5-year period. An experimental Faculty-in Residence Program at CBS is also briefly described. (SW)

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Liberal Learning and the Corporation

Thomas H. Wyman
Chairman, CBS Inc.

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An address by Thomas H. Wyman
on the occasion of the presentation of
The Benjamin Rush Award
November 14, 1985
Dickinson College
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

The Benjamin Rush Award for Humanistic Values in Corporate Life

The Benjamin Rush Award for Humanistic Values in Corporate Life is to be presented annually by Dickinson College to a business leader who has demonstrated through his or her actions in the corporate world a personal commitment to the values of the liberal arts as expressed in the principles upon which Dickinson was founded and to which the College is committed.

The award itself is a medal which has been struck in bronze and bears a likeness of Benjamin Rush, a founder of Dickinson College and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

In presenting the Benjamin Rush Award for Humanistic Values in Corporate Life, the only award of its kind, Dickinson hopes to take a leadership role in building a bridge between the corporate world and the liberal arts community and to draw attention to the ways in which the liberal arts enhance the world of business.

Presentation of the Benjamin Rush Award for Humanistic Values in Corporate Life has been made possible through a gift from Dr. Wilbur M. Rabinowitz, a member of the class of 1940 and a trustee of the College, on behalf of the Rabinowitz Foundation. The Benjamin Rush Award is part of The Wilbur M. Rabinowitz Program of Visiting Business and Government Leaders, which also will include an executive-in-residence program in the spring.

Liberal Learning and the Corporation

Thank you very much President Banks.

I appreciate very much the chance to be with all of you this evening. I am grateful for this award. I like the point of view it celebrates and I like this place.

Dickinson College has taken a leadership role in exploring the relationship of business and the liberal arts. It is a role which fits the distinguished history of this institution and the character of its founder, Benjamin Rush.

Looking forward to being here, I have taken the chance to read about Doctor Rush. He had a bold vision of American destiny—fitting for a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Apart from his contributions as a physician, he was a proponent of the abolition of slavery . . . and a fighter for prison reforms, higher education for women and free public schools for the poor. He was also Treasurer of the National Mint, a point of tangency with the business world.

The range of Benjamin Rush's interests and the scope of his accomplishments mark him as a man possessing the attributes we associate with a liberal arts education.

I suppose everyone has his own list of what these attributes might be. Mine would include:

- An open, enquiring and flexible mind
- The possession of broadly applicable skills
- The exercise of individual judgment—sensitive and thoughtful
- An adaptability to change
- An affection for the arts
- The ability to write and to speak clearly—and to read.

This evening I would like to examine the value to the corporate world of these characteristics. I preface my remarks by acknowledging a bias. My own education was in the liberal arts, and I have been convinced for some time that it is the best way to prepare for life—no matter what you plan to do, or be.

A person who writes a thesis on Yeats, or majors in fine arts or specializes in French literature, ought to feel comfortable about a future in corporate life—at Citibank, at IBM or at CBS. And all of those companies ought to feel comfortable having such a person. But comfort is not enough. I am convinced that the future leadership of Corporate America will depend on those who have experienced the varied rigors of a liberal arts education as opposed to narrower, more specialized courses of instruction.

I believe this on the basis of both common sense and self interest. There is nothing that a Chief Executive likes less than to be surprised. But ours is an increasingly complex world characterized by frequent and accelerated change. Business decisions affect—and are affected by—many constituencies. Successful executives will be those who understand and interpret complex relationships. To be effective demands continual reconsideration of assumptions underlying old and familiar networks . . . as well as the gathering and sorting of new information.

This puts a premium on managers with the ability to be flexible, critical and capable of continuous learning; managers with the skills to anticipate change . . . and not be surprised. Without such managers any business runs the risk of being buried in "The Corporate Graveyard"—the place that former Citicorp Chairman Walter Wriston described as "the last stop for those who believe in the divine rights of inherited markets . . . and who failed to change with a changing world."

It is surprising that Corporate America has not paid more attention to the potential value of a liberal arts education. It would seem obvious that as a means of career preparation, the liberal arts are particularly appealing. The Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame, made this point recently when he wrote: "As we go from a goods-producing to an information processing economy, from hierarchical management to decentralized entrepreneurship, from lifetimes at one desk to multi-faceted careers, we come to prize more and more those whose education has been concerned with the shared human experience of the community, of production and consumption, of time, of nature, of symbol, of value, and of belief."

In a forthcoming book—which compellingly makes the case for liberally educated managers in the corporation—Joseph Johnston writes: "George Bernard Shaw once described the English and Americans as two peoples separated by a common language. In much the same way, business and American higher education are sectors of society separated by a common problem—their mutual doubt and confusion regarding the practical value of a liberal education."

The irony of this doubt and confusion is apparent when we consider the fact that a partnership between business and education was forged long ago . . . and the productivity generated from this partnership is well known.

Over the years, corporations have traditionally provided financial support to colleges and universities. Corporations have also commercialized scientific and technological advances developed in educational settings. Now, more than ever, American industry needs academia's technological innovations in order to remain competitive in world markets.

But with regard to the most productive use of our colleges and universities—the utilization of their graduates—we in the corporate world have been strangely myopic. Academic preparation for business has remained the province of the scientific and technical fields on one hand, and the business and professional fields on the other. Computer literacy adds exciting dimensions to our capabilities, but it must not be seen as a replacement for real literacy.

A well-documented trend toward what has been called "academic vocationalism" underscores this. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, "During the 15 year period ending in 1981-82, the undergraduate majors of college students shifted significantly. There was a clearly discernible movement away from a number of the traditional arts and sciences, while the number and percent of students who majored in business and management and some other occupationally oriented fields increased substantially."

This is troubling news . . . particularly when married to the conclusions of The Cox Report on the American Corporation. That Report, written in 1982, found that the infusion of employees hired on the basis of a particular area of study "results in executives who are not properly developed to assume general management responsibilities later on."

This conclusion of the Cox Report has not gone unnoticed. The importance of liberal arts education to leadership within the business world has been the subject of occasional and eloquent comment by the heads of corporations. But despite the professions of faith, not much has happened. Very few corporations really look at the liberal arts in a meaningful way. The reasons are numerous—including inattention to the problem, inertia and a preoccupation with short-term profit results.

It is also the result of the fact that few in academia, or in the business world, see their relationship clearly. Unfortunately, as Mr. Johnston went on to point out: "The old distortions and stereotypes—of faculty as wooly-minded idealists and business persons as profit mongering low-brows—still enjoy considerable currency."

Compounding the problem is the fact that there has been very little research on the relationship between a liberal education and business leadership. Are, in fact, liberally educated managers more effective than others? Should the business community be spending more time and more effort trying to attract liberal arts graduates? What is the practical value of a liberal arts background in a corporation?

The failure to answer these and related questions has made it virtually impossible for the business or academic communities to combine resources to put liberal arts on the corporate agenda in a visible and permanent way. It has made it impossible for either your world, or mine, to be in thoughtful contact.

As a result, we each suffer. Young people who are entering college—and their parents—are concerned that liberal arts students will not receive the kind of education they need to prepare them for the job market. For our part, we lose the potential of a large and untapped personnel resource—a resource that may be especially important to help us meet the challenges of the years ahead.

Believing that Corporate America has not focused enough attention on this subject, CBS announced last March a $750,000 grant for the purpose of establishing a Corporate Council On The Liberal Arts at the American Academy of Art and Sciences in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Our goal was to establish a resource for examining the influence which a liberal arts educational background has on effective business leadership. This we felt would place corporations in a better position to determine to what degree, and how best to recruit undergraduates or graduate students with liberal arts studies at the heart of their education.

We also felt that the work of the Council would encourage liberal arts institutions like Dickinson, by putting into better perspective for students and their parents the specific strengths of a liberal arts education as they relate to the corporate world.

In summation, we see the Council as a vehicle for drawing attention to the liberal arts. We see it as a clearinghouse for information within the corporate community. And we see it as an expression of corporate interest in the relationship of liberal arts to business.

We are fortunate that Frank Stanton, the President Emeritus of CBS, accepted the Chairmanship of the Council. We are also pleased that eight other companies—American Express, AT&T, Exxon, General Foods, General Motors, Honeywell, Johnson & Johnson and The Prudential Insurance Company— have joined us in this endeavor.

There are obviously any number of viewpoints and disciplines involved in shaping the agenda of this new organization. A short list of undertakings might include:

- To evaluate old and identify new ways to encourage contact and exchanges between the business and liberal arts communities.
- To organize a continuing exchange of information regarding the experiences of corporations which have tried in special ways to relate to the academic world so that successes and failures can be shared on a regular basis.
- To explore what corporations can do internally to utilize effectively liberal arts graduates . . . and ensure their progression to management positions.
- To review present programs for reacquainting mid-career management with the liberal arts.
- To conduct an audit of corporate hiring practices to discover what steps may be needed to give special considerations to outstanding liberal arts graduates.

There are two areas where the Council will not involve itself. First, there will be no attempt to influence curriculum design at colleges and universities. This is an area where we must not intrude.

Second, the Council is not designed to encourage corporate funding of the liberal arts. This is a worthy objective, but a number of established organizations are already involved in this effort.

At CBS we are in the process of conducting a two-part program designed to provide us with more information on the role of liberal arts graduates in our organization. In the first part of that program we took a personnel snapshot of the company to identify who the liberal arts people are, what their various majors were and what they are doing now.

A second part of the project, which is just underway, will track the performance of a group of liberal arts graduates compared to a control group over a five year period. Our information will be coordinated with similar programs being carried out at other companies who are members of the Council.

Projects such as ours—and others which will be undertaken by the Council—will develop slowly. The results will probably not be dramatic. But the effects will be cumulative. And there are certain things which I think we can predict with some certainty:

- That this kind of thoughtful concentration on the liberal arts by corporations will represent encouragement to liberal arts institutions.
- That it will put into better perspective for parents and young students the specific strengths of a liberal arts education which may be identified as building blocks for business careers.
- That it will tell middle management—those who do the hiring—that our interest in this area is serious . . . and theirs should be also.
- And finally that it will say something good about Corporate America to the general public—and to our critics—as we address the relationship of the substantive components of a rounded life to business leadership.

Before concluding my remarks this evening, I would like to take the opportunity to tell you about another way in which we at CBS have tried to be active in this area.

This past summer we invited four distinguished liberal arts professors to join us in an experimental Faculty-in-Residence Program. Each of these professors was assigned to a CBS operating group and worked on a special research project relating to their area of interest. These projects were designed to offer both CBS employees and the faculty the fresh perspective of new ideas . . . and new lenses through which to see familiar ideas.

We had an historian from Columbia work in our Program Practices Department on the issue of docu-dramas. He brought his liberal arts viewpoint to a review of projects under development . . . and provided us with a long-range historical perspective for this kind of story-telling.

Drawing on the age-old relationship between arts, literature and social taste, a professor of the humanities at Columbia brought to our Social Research Department a fresh framework within which to consider the thorny question of whether television creates or follows social tastes.

A key issue in CBS's production of audio records and tapes is how a large manufacturing facility can be structured and managed to enhance employee productivity and identification with our company. A Professor of Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York worked with our Records Group to explore psychological and social ramifications of the introduction of new technologies in the workplace. We expect that the application of his special insights to these human issues will contribute to an improved quality of life for those who work in our Records Manufacturing facilities.

Finally a professor from Princeton, who is an expert on the eighteenth century, provided our Publishing Group executives with fascinating background

on how the publishing industry was shaped . . . and how early publishing faced a number of the same problems which our executives face today.

In addition to working on special projects, each faculty member offered a series of lectures and seminars in their individual fields to employee groups. We had no idea what the response would be, but these seminars were so oversubscribed that we were obliged to choose participants on a lottery basis.

Our Faculty-in-Residence Program was a substantial success from a number of points of view.

By casting the liberal arts in terms of real issues which affect CBS, the faculty members were able to facilitate the exploration of those issues for us—and for themselves. The faculty members also had the opportunity to see another world. They developed new perspectives on what we do . . . and also on their own academic disciplines.

Our executives who worked with the visiting faculty responded enthusiastically to the program. And for their part, the visiting faculty reported finding bright, hard-working people who were ready to share information and eager to learn about other worlds and ideas. Looking ahead to the committee meetings and the administrative tasks awaiting them on return to their academic institutions, the faculty members expressed some doubt as to which was the "real world" and which was the "ivory tower."

As for our employees . . . they benefited most of all. An employee who attended a seminar on Plato, Dante and Genesis, observed: "The readings, lectures and discussions began to have a valid application to my everyday thoughts. It was very exciting." Another wrote to one of the faculty members, "I once had a conversation with an artist who tried to explain to me that he didn't paint the trees, he painted the space between them. As a participant in your seminar I want to thank you for trying to help me see the space between the trees."

Alfred Sloan, the celebrated Chairman of General Motors, once wrote:

"When the annals of our time are recorded, it will most likely be found that the two greatest contributions of our time were the U.S. university and the U.S. corporation: both mighty forces, both uniquely American. If these two forces can go forward together in understanding and cooperation, there is perhaps no problem beyond their joint power for resolution. If, however, they choose to go their separate ways, there is no solution of any problem affecting either that is likely to be long lasting."

I have no doubt that the long lasting solutions to the problems facing American businesses today will come from those liberally educated executives who have been trained to "see the space between the trees."

Thank you again for your warm welcome to this marvelous place.